

MENTORING IN THE U.S. AIR FORCE: A CORNERSTONE FOR SUCCESS THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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The U.S. military continues its transformation into a leaner, more capable force in to meet new and changing threats. But with transformation and continued force reductions come a heavy operational burden on the remaining personnel, stretching the fabric of organizational effectiveness to its limits. Mentoring relationships are the cornerstone of an effective team and organization. Current formal and informal mentoring processes in the U.S. Air Force are presented here, along with results of survey and interview data and lessons learned.

THE U.S. MILITARY continues its transformation to a leaner, more capable force to meet new and changing threats. But with transformation and continued force reductions come a heavy operational burden on the remaining personnel. This burden has manifested itself in several ways. In 1999 the U.S. Air Force (USAF) failed to meet its recruiting goals for the first time in its history. More frequent and longer deployments in more dangerous conditions result in more divorce, higher occupational stress levels, and an increase in posttraumatic stress disorder, which place great demands on already overwhelmed military medical service personnel facing their own personnel and resource challenges. According to a recent Air Force Association publication, "We are fast approaching the point where the demands of the Global War on Terrorism are incompatible with the current size of the military" (Top Issues of the Air Force Association, 2005). Some have estimated that since the late 1980s, the U.S. military is 40 percent smaller but has engaged in 400 percent more operations globally. Due to the strategy to recapitalize funds to support research and development of new air and space operations through even greater personnel reductions, the USAF will shrink by 40,000 full-time-equivalent positions by 2011.

Given the many challenges, I believe that one of the most effective approaches to combat the resulting stresses on the remaining personnel is to revitalize the USAF cultural concept of mentoring. To quote Major General Lon

E. Maggart, U.S. Army, "Leadership success in the immediate future will depend on mentoring more than any other single process" (Maggart & James, 1999).

The USAF has had formal instructions and guidance on mentoring since 1996 (U.S. Department of the Air Force, 1996, 2000a, 2000b). The directive states, "Mentoring is a fundamental responsibility of all Air Force supervisors. They must know their people, accept personal responsibility for them, and be accountable for their professional development" (U.S. Department of the Air Force, 2000a, p. 1). The instruction adds, "Commanders are responsible for promoting a robust mentoring program within their unit" (U.S. Department of the Air Force, 2000b, p. 2). Despite formal written guidance, definitions of mentoring, topical examples and process guides, and apparent explicit accountability for its success, mentoring appears to be one of those noble leadership behaviors that is engaged in only when time or availability allows. And in today's rapidly downsizing and frequently deploying military environment, that may be infrequently.

A study that was part of a professional military education program research paper found that "Air Force mentoring programs substitute career management for leadership development" (Lancaster, 2003). Indeed, my own experience over a 20-year USAF career suggests that if and when mentoring happens, it is poorly prepared for and focuses on existential issues (for example, "What do you want to do in five years?") rather than addressing

professional and leadership development. Senior leaders who are the role model for mentoring seem to believe that mentoring is “simply the sponsorship of a junior officer by a senior officer who insures the junior officer gets the right jobs at the right time and therefore gets promoted early” (Smith, 1996).

After conducting an organizational and environmental analysis, I wanted to explore what gaps, if any, existed between the desired mentoring culture and the actual state of mentoring within today’s USAF, using my installation, Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico, as a pilot study. As chairperson for the mentoring and development team, I spent several months interviewing and surveying various people about mentoring. I wanted to find out if this installation’s execution of the USAF policies and instructions was visible to the mentees most in need of effective mentoring. My sample consisted of all three workforce personnel categories: enlisted, officer, and civilian government employees. I talked to 10 managers at various levels in several organizations and then spoke with the people they nominated as strong mentors and 80 students from two classes for middle managers. I compared this information to that found in prior informal discussions with senior leaders and entry-level workers and with informal surveys of attendees at a civilian personnel manager’s course. I asked four questions:

“What is your personal example of what a good mentor does?”

“What do mentees seem to need most?”

“If we had a Mentor Hall of Fame, who would you nominate, and why?”

“If there was one thing you could do to make mentoring more of a consistent priority, what would it be?”

WHAT A GOOD MENTOR DOES

The consensus opinion of a good mentor is a person who “truly understands that mentoring is a way to develop and make a positive impact on people.” Other comments expanded that basic definition:

“They take the time to hear you and guide you in decisions while providing career and general life advice.”

“A mentor stops in to find out about your issues, gives advice, and helps you achieve your goals.”

“They help set you up for future success, promote good values and ethics, and listen to you.”

“A good mentor shows you how to do things by example and interacts with you on a personal level.”

Good mentors make time for mentees, seek them out, and listen to their concerns and questions.

These definitions and examples have several common denominators. One is that the cornerstone is time, today’s most precious commodity. Good mentors make time for mentees, seek them out, and listen to their concerns and questions. This is not midterm feedback in the performance management process. Rather, mentoring takes place from an employee’s initial entrance into his or her work section until he or she leaves the organization. Yet even the mentoring group with the most consistent mentoring culture, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), seemed almost guilty acknowledging that their many administrative demands left them little time to make contact with their mentees. This was despite Air Force Instruction 36-2618, The Enlisted Force Structure, which specifically states, “Failure to observe the mandatory provisions of this instruction . . . is a violation of the military’s criminal code” (U.S. Department of the Air Force, 2004, p. 1).

With the impending retirement of up to 50 percent of baby boomer managers in the next decade, every organization is taking a look at its bench strength to fill projected personnel gaps (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001). Yet the many situational constraints (lack of environmental supports) on mentors stemming from the organizational transformation in the military may handicap even the most devoted mentors. Many of the mentors I spoke with stated they were “always available” for their mentees but seldom had the time to sit with them and do any structured leadership or performance development. They were available for questions, that is, but not for a vital role in the leadership succession planning of their organization. Another paradox of the open-door mentorship philosophy is that it places the burden for a vital and meaningful mentoring relationship on young mentees, who may be relatively unassertive. Over 60 percent of the mentees I spoke with had not had a session with their mentor in the preceding two months. As a response to these and other challenges, Headquarters Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC) contracted with Tripple Creek Associates to create a Web-based mentor-ing tool titled, “Mission-Driven Mentoring: An Air Force Mentoring Network” (http://www.3creekmentoring.com/3creekmentoring_

dashboard/USAirForce/index.cfm?). The front page of this outstanding tool can be seen in Figure 1.

Registering as either a mentor or mentee (or both) is done in less than 10 minutes, with mentees determining the depth or complexity of the mentoring relationship. A mentee can select more than one mentor, and mentors are not in the chain-of-command and need not be on the same military installation as the mentee. Mentees receive a list of mentors with biographies based on the system's match of the mentee requests and mentor list of skills to be offered. A description of mentoring, the benefits to both mentors and mentees, and the types of mentoring relationships facilitated by this Web-based tool are shown in Figure 2.

Despite the ease of use, and sophistication of this tool, senior commanders are often quite vocal in their objections to it. Mentoring, they say, should be "less formal" and "is just what good leaders do." Without senior leaders' endorsement, performance improvement technologists fight an uphill battle to get the tool used by the personnel best able to benefit from it.

WHAT MENTEES SEEM TO NEED MOST

Many in my interview pool were both mentor and mentee, so they provided answers for both what they

wanted from their mentors and what their mentees seemed to need the most from them. In their view, mentees need guidance, someone setting the example, someone to listen and provide feedback, sometimes supportive, sometimes challenging them to do more, but equipping them with the skills to be excellent in their work. Mentees in the USAF, like other organizations, want to know where they fit in the organization and how what they do makes a difference.

An interesting dynamic in this mentoring is that many of the mentors are from the baby boomer generation and many of the mentees are from Generation X. One of the USAF core values is "Service Before Self," which boomers often translate as an unwritten expectation to stay as late as needed to get the work done. This is in direct contrast to the work-life balance view of Gen-X mentees who, in their words, "have a life" beyond the military. I have seen this dynamic at work many times as mentors expect their high-intensity, fast-paced work style to be emulated by their mentees. Mentees need to understand how they fit into the big picture and also need role models on how to lead. Not surprisingly, the mentees echoed many of the generational and personality qualities described by Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2000). In contrast, boomers often interpret Generation Xers' tendencies to limit over-



FIGURE 1. MISSION-DRIVEN MENTORING: AN AIR FORCE MENTORING NETWORK HOME PAGE

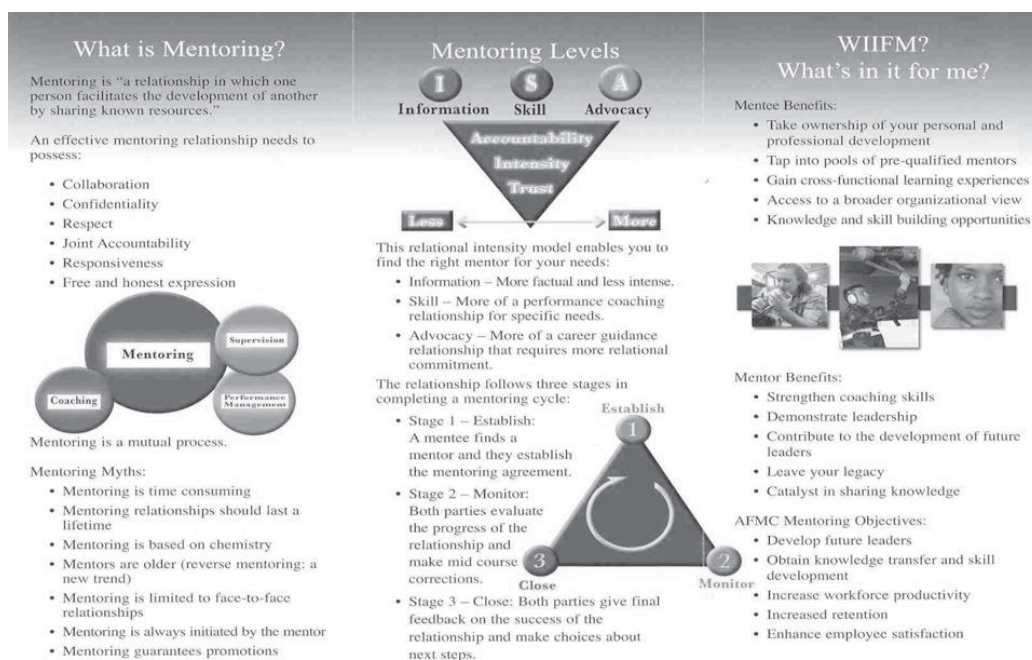


FIGURE 2. MENTORING MARKETING BROCHURE, INSIDE PANELS

time and commit to external activities such as fitness and hobbies as a sign of lack of discipline or "not being serious about their careers." Another paradox revealed in this qualitative study was that since most mentoring occurs between supervisors and their supervisees—and the USAF mentoring culture presupposes that this is the benchmark to the practice of mentoring—many mentees felt in a quandary since one of the items they needed assistance with was how to manage conflict, especially related to issues with their direct supervisors.

MENTOR HALL OF FAME

In every study, there are always pockets of excellence—people in a variety of leadership roles who take the time to meet with and mentor their people despite institutional obstacles. Here are some of the descriptors of these mentors:

"Very reliable, trustworthy, dedicated. Excellent leader/supervisor."

"Has truly learned to balance the mission and the people, and draws out the best in her people."

"A superior officer who gracefully manages people and the mission while accomplishing both. Very open, and you can talk with her about personal and professional issues."

"Really cares about people, and has the ability to focus on the positive amid any controversy. Has a willingness to listen to folks anytime and anywhere."

"Great at management by walking around, set up enlisted calls for the organization, and lunch-and-learn training sessions."

"A great listener and doesn't pass judgment."

"Always there, no matter how busy he is. He is genuine, a true mentor."

"Knowledgeable, mission first, but still has time/concern for people."

Mentors nominated into our hall of fame included the full diversity of leaders: men and women, minorities, all ranks, and civilian supervisors and managers. The common thread seemed to be a unique combination of emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Lawler, 2003; Maxwell, 1994), consistently setting aside time to seek out mentees, and an ability to align individual performance with organizational goals (Bradford & Cohen, 1997; Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; DePree, 1989). Perhaps these mentors have taken *The Leadership Challenge* and passed with flying colors, as they *Encouraged the Heart* of their mentees (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, 2003). Stepping up to be a leader in action, not in title, is essential to be an effective mentor, developer of future leaders, and a

linchpin holding the people, processes, and mission together in these transformational times.

MAKING MENTORING MORE OF A CONSISTENT PRIORITY

A common theme in business books recently has been the rediscovery that great strategy is just wishful thinking without effective execution (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). The paradox in mentoring is that the individual planning the strategy of mentoring is also the executor of that plan. The NCOs I spoke with strongly believed that mentoring is an essential responsibility, but also admitted that making time for it is a real challenge. The following suggestions for making mentoring more of a priority were taken from a variety of NCOs, from those most junior to the most senior:

"I strive to be a good mentor because of the great mentors I have had."

"Ensure people are not waiting for troops to come to them; go out and mentor. Make it mandatory on Wing [installation] Training Day or carve out a designated mandatory time to ensure it happens."

"It starts with you. Be a good mentor, and those who you have touched will follow suit."

I have been riding the circuit of leadership meetings at every level spreading my passion about mentoring and sharing the resources the USAF has provided to make mentoring a key link in individual and organizational performance excellence. One critical resource is the Air Force's list of enduring leadership competencies (U.S. Department of the Air Force, 2006), which presents these leadership competencies, broken down into those most appropriate at the tactical (personal leadership), operational (leading people and teams), and strategic (leading the institution) levels of leadership.

The majority of active mentors come from the operational level of leaders, and one of those competencies identified is, "Mentor and coach for growth and success." The developers of the Web-based mentoring tool, Triple Creek Associates, also included worksheets listing the enduring leadership competencies in a format that allows them to be used as part of the unit-based mentoring process between a supervisor and employee. Both mentors and mentees rate their current abilities using a scale of 1 (very effective) through 5 (very ineffective). Examples of abilities for operational-level leaders to self-assess in this process include the following:

- My ability to drive performance through shared vision, value, and accountability
- My ability to influence through win/win solutions
- My ability to mentor and coach for growth and success
- My ability to promote collaboration and teamwork
- My ability to partner to maximize results

I include information about USAF enduring leadership competencies and their availability through this mentoring tool in all public briefings and in my leadership workshop, "Leadership at the Tactical and Operational Level" (<http://www.kirtland.af.mil/Organizations/377ABW/ohc/index.htm>).

Mentoring is successfully practiced by those with a heart for developing others, the discipline to both initiate and sustain a mentoring relationship, and the tools and the experience to be a successful mentor. Outstanding mentors did this naturally, but for the vast majority, making mentoring a priority by their senior leaders, including it in the performance feedback the potential mentors get from their rating official, and consistent training will be the most effective performance improvement initiatives resulting in a true return on investment. This return on investment will be measured in unit climate surveys, retention rates, and the sustained accomplishment of organizational goals.

LESSONS LEARNED

The recommendations that follow are not just for the USAF; other organizations can benefit from them as well:

- Have the senior leader (CEO) of the organization consistently express the value of mentoring in memorandums and correspondence. Too often an initiative starts up in response to a crisis (for example, the loss of key personnel, an ethics scandal, dropping retention rates of new employees or those in prized career fields) and then is abandoned when the issue seems resolved. Instead, a plan for the initiative's sustainment must be incorporated in the initial strategic plan, and there must be a well-thought-out communication plan to articulate it to those who will execute it. If the leader simply makes grand speeches for a new mentoring program, the words will fall on the deaf ears of those who will be charged with executing that program or strategy, including key subordinate leaders, as "just another program of the month."
- Every leader should be rated on his or her mentorship role. Those with direct reports should be rated on their annual appraisal in part based on their success in men-

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toring and developing those direct reports. Without accountability, even the best-intentioned mentors will let mentoring slide as they are distracted by multiple competing priorities. The USAF's written leadership competencies should be part of the rating system. All organizations need to hold supervisors, managers, and leaders accountable to a set of defined leadership competencies that includes mentoring and developing their subordinates.

- Mentoring should be kept informal only when there are documented performance outcomes demonstrating that mentoring is happening and is happening in an effective manner. Too many mentors resist organized and systematic or, in their words, formal mentoring processes. The danger of informal mentoring programs is that mentoring is happening only in the minds of the mentors, not in their behavior with their mentees.
- Mentoring should be a highly prized and rewarded leader behavior and cultural norm. In other words, it should be included in the reward and recognition programs—both those structured by the institution and those initiated by good leaders and mentors.
- Performance improvement technologists, trainers, human resource personnel, and leaders must consistently provide the tools for an organization's mentoring success and strive for leader accountability to enact the four previous recommendations.

THE BOTTOM LINE

People working in organizations facing constant downsizing, restructuring, increasingly unrealistic performance expectations, and crippling resource shortages more than ever before need leaders who do more than say, "People are

our number one priority." Employees need to feel and touch the reality that they are a priority. This priority is best experienced through a vital and consistent mentoring relationship between leaders and their direct subordinates. The USAF, like many other large organizations, faces multiple organizational constraints and is striving to strengthen operational performance despite these constraints. Just as the family is generally seen as the cornerstone of a functional society, the relationship between a supervisor, manager, or leader and his or her direct subordinates is the family of the workplace. However, corporations today face a barrage of disincentives, organizational constraints, and naysayers who believe mentoring is too time-consuming. Let us all remember that the work gets done only if the workers do it. For the workers to do it right and want to do it with excellence, they have to be trained, encouraged, and rewarded for their work by mentors and leaders. 🏔️

Note: The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the U.S. government, Department of Defense, or U.S. Air Force.

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